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**The Locus of Identity:  
Death, Genealogy, and History in William Faulkner's Works**

Kayoko Shimanuki

According to Erik H. Erikson's *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, in a person's life cycle, the periods of adolescence and early adulthood are of particular importance concerning the identity crisis. In this regard, this dissertation will concentrate on Faulkner's works related to Quentin Compson, who is one of the most important protagonists in the Yoknapatawpha world. Considering Quentin as a "semi-autobiographical figure" for Faulkner, Michael Millgate discusses that Quentin is "at one stage intended to function as the essential recording figure" and suggests that Faulkner "intended Quentin to fill some structural and indeed specifically regional role" as "a focal point—though not necessarily the only one" (41, 42). It is undeniable that Quentin holds a special place in Faulkner's mind in that he plays a pivotal role in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, "That Evening Sun," "A Justice," "Lion," and "Appendix: Compsons: 1699-1945."<sup>1</sup>

A controversial issue among Faulkner critics is whether to consider these works as parts of the Compson story or to treat them as individual works. One of the biggest problems lies in Quentin's re-emergence after his suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*. As Doreen Fowler notes, "It seems as if Faulkner elected to revoke Quentin's suicide or that, in Faulkner's mind, Quentin was not dead and that Quentin's telling changes Quentin as well as Faulkner" (*Postmodernism* 108). In his later years, Faulkner said, "I don't have any trouble at all going back to pick up [a character]. . . . These people I figure belong to me and I have the right to move them about in time

when I need them” (*FU* 78, 79). However, as discussed in chapters 3, 4, and 8, many discrepancies among Quentin-related works exist—especially in regard to his age—which have perplexed readers. Because of this, there are some critics, such as Hans H. Skei, who treat each work autonomously as much as possible (Skei 179-80). However, the significance of these works increases, owing to Faulkner’s re-using of Quentin as a protagonist and narrator after his suicide. If we consider these novels and short stories as a part of a series, it could shed more light on the identity issues. Accordingly, it is worthwhile to focus on Quentin-related works and explore the locus of each character’s identity in terms of death, genealogy, and history.

First of all, it is important to always remember the fact that Quentin committed suicide in Massachusetts—not in the South. Faulkner once explained Quentin’s mixed feelings toward the South in *Absalom, Absalom!*, stating, “It’s incidentally the story of Quentin Compson’s hatred of the bad qualities in the country he loves” (*FU* 71). This comment is in reference to Quentin’s attempt to leave his native land as a Harvard student and to his intention of drowning himself in the Charles River in Massachusetts. Although the reason for avoiding his homeland as the location of his suicide is open to debate, it is unlikely that his suicide is the consequence of his thoughtless behavior. This dissertation begins with an emphasis on Quentin’s firm resolution to end his life outside Mississippi and examines his sense of rootlessness and his effort to overcome the identity crisis through death.

Quentin’s death in the very first book in which he appeared has become an unforgettable episode because of his reappearance in Faulkner’s other works. While Estella Schoenberg’s main interest lies in Quentin’s “double function as protagonist and narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!*,” she places a special emphasis on his suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*. Schoenberg offers this explanation:

[I]t is Quentin the suicide Faulkner's readers remember. That Quentin, defined by his death, appears only in the two novels to which his death is as central as it is to all the fictions of Yoknapatawpha and all the fictions of the American South. (28)

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, it is unclear whether Quentin's death is a suicide. However, his early death in Massachusetts in 1910 coincides with the chronology of *The Sound and the Fury*, and considering his health (if not mental) condition, seems strange if it is a natural death. Schoenberg often comes to a hasty conclusion by developing her argument as if the two novels were combined into one (especially when she mixes up the chronologies of the two novels that do not fit completely). Still, it is suggestive that the strong presence of Quentin presupposes his suicidal death. Quentin's identity can be examined not only from his ambivalent feelings toward the South, which includes his family, but also from his obsession with death. Chapter 1 discusses that his actual suicide contributes to the formation of his identity.

Second, Quentin's identity can be found in the Compson genealogy, which embodies the transition of Southern history from antebellum to postbellum periods. In this regard, John T. Irwin's psychoanalytic study of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, which draws on Sigmund Freud's concepts of "the Oedipus complex, the death instinct, and the repetition compulsion" (4), provides supporting evidence for this dissertation. Discussing Quentin's suicide in the context of Christianity, Irwin focuses on two major elements that are related to genealogy: "the Oedipal triangle (father, mother, son) and the three generations of patrilinearity (grandfather, father, son, or father, son, grandson)" (125). These factors are noteworthy because they dictate Quentin's suicide and identity through genealogy. As chapters 7 and 8 succinctly show, the Compsons are highly conscious of their genealogy and

cannot escape its influence. When they become sensitive to their familial roots, they either reject or engage in the continuation of such tradition. Chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8 deal with the genealogical/familial issues concerning three generations, parent-child, and brother-sister and examine their significance in relation to each character's identity.

Third, historical attachment to the native land enables Quentin to reconfirm his identity. As John W. Hunt notes, Quentin is the first major character-narrator who scrupulously tells the story of Yoknapatawpha County (368). His roles as a narrator and listener are indispensable in Yoknapatawpha's formation and development. Hunt adds that "Quentin's special task had been to give a moral and historical account of Yoknapatawpha County with the sensibility of a young and vulnerable aristocrat who suffers from the diminishment of meaning in his time" (375). His awareness that he is a Harvard student from Mississippi provides a distorted sense of reality that cannot be fulfilled. There is little doubt that Quentin is suffering from a serious identity crisis and is trying to cope with it. Together with the genealogical issues, a historical approach to Quentin's identity addresses the fundamental reason for his existence. All chapters more or less demonstrate that history is not unrelated to one's position in society and that one must reconsider his/her identity, which has been uncertain and often complex.

In the meantime, Quentin is not the only character who appears as the subject of this dissertation; there are also other characters who provide valuable information on identity problems. In fact, all of the chapters, with the exception of chapters 1 and 7, involve characters and narrators other than Quentin and reveal supplementary aspects of the identity issues that he cannot fully disclose. As Faulkner once said, "[E]very time any character gets into a book, no matter how minor, he's actually telling his biography—that's all anyone ever does, he tells his own biography, talking about

himself, in a thousand different terms, but himself” (*FU* 275). In other words, the act of retelling characters’ stories refers to the search for their identity, which is largely influenced by their sense of place, family relationships, and history.

As previously stated, this dissertation focuses on Quentin-related works. For structure purposes, it is divided into four parts and eight chapters.

Chapter 1 focuses on the second section of *The Sound and the Fury* and examines the meaning of Quentin’s suicide in relation to the location of his suicide, the Charles River. I will investigate the possible location for Quentin’s suicide and discuss the geographical dimension of the meandering river, which signifies his feelings of stagnation and rootlessness regarding the South. I will also make a comparison between the flows of the river and time and point out that both of them remind Quentin of Mr. Compson. Quentin’s drowning can be understood as an act of defiance to his father’s nihilistic values and attitude; in fact, it is through the act of suicide that he tries to recover his identity.

Chapter 2 verifies the strong presence of the dead Quentin in the fourth section of *The Sound and the Fury*. The fourth-section narrator takes advantage of the objective narrative of the first-section narrator, Benjy, while showing emotional attachment to the second-section narrator, Quentin, and the third-section narrator, Jason. The fourth section, particularly Dilsey’s story, reveals that this section’s narrator internalizes Quentin’s values, and predicts that his presence continues to exist in Faulkner’s later works. This section reconfirms that the fourth-section narrator, “Faulkner,” still cares for Quentin and does not hesitate to recover his identity in another narrator’s mind.

In chapter 3, I will explore the reason why Quentin is chosen as the narrator of “That Evening Sun.” The age Faulkner gave him in this story, twenty-four, has long

puzzled critics and readers, since a person of the same name commits suicide when he is around twenty years old in *The Sound and the Fury*. I will contend that Faulkner purposefully set Quentin's age at twenty-four to imply that Nancy, a black washerwoman, met the same fate as Quentin. Although Nancy's voice and feeling—her identity—are mostly neglected in the short story, Quentin eventually understands her difficult situation in the South and overlaps his position with hers.

Although "A Justice" primarily focuses on Sam Fathers' relationship with the Choctaws, chapter 4 reexamines his blackness, which is derived from his black slave mother. In the end, Quentin becomes aware of racial discrimination based on the "one-drop rule" in the South, to which even Sam is no exception. Sam's genealogical explanation ironically results in his emphasizing his blackness. Quentin's retrogressive commentary in the last section signifies his inability to face the burden of the South until his death. His obsession with death would become a trigger for reconfirming his identity as a Southern white man.

Chapters 5 through 7 deal with *Absalom, Absalom!* While the focus of chapter 5 is Charles Bon, it also includes the analysis of the Voodoo trickster Legba, who shares sexual, racial, and spatial ambiguities with Bon. Additionally, I will examine the histories of Haiti and New Orleans and infer that Bon's role as a trickster comes from his mother. In the end, the parent-child relationship becomes the central issue in Bon's story. The contrast between being his mother's instrument and being his father's abandoned son, in addition to the issue of his mixed-race identity, eventually produces a sharp image of Bon as a mysterious and ill-fated figure in the South.

Chapter 6 is about Shreve McCannon, who reconstructs the Sutpen story with Quentin in their Harvard University dormitory room. Although Shreve plays an important role in compensating the missing links of the Sutpen story and giving it

coherence in the novel, critics have considered him as a mere foreigner with a detached demeanor. If we reconsider Shreve's role as a narrator in the historical context of Canada, however, he comes across as being more than an outsider. Through the reconstruction of the Sutpen story, Shreve deepens his understanding of the South and revalidates his own Canadian identity.

In chapter 7, I will argue that Quentin makes the decision to commit suicide when he meets Sutpen's son, Henry, at Sutpen's mansion. Because they share similar characteristics and life experiences, Quentin intuitively associates his future self with the dying Henry and decides to leave the Sutpen story, or the legacy of the South, as his will to Shreve. Quentin has selected as his successor someone who is completely exempt from the historical and moral burden of the South's roots in slavery and yet can feel close to and identify with the Sutpen story. Shreve's entry, located at the very end of the genealogy, shows that he has become a part of the Sutpen story as its last successor.

"Appendix: Compsons: 1699-1945" is neither the introduction nor the summary of *The Sound and the Fury*; rather, it is structured as the Compson genealogy. Instead of examining Quentin's entry in the Appendix, chapter 8 pays attention to the first half of Caddy's account and reconsiders her inner feelings toward Quentin and the impact of his death later in her life. Her sense of loss caused by his death becomes one of the incentives for her to love her daughter, Miss Quentin, who inherited her uncle's name. Caddy's memory of beloved Quentin is reinforced when she thinks of Miss Quentin. The Appendix exhibits the influence of genealogy on each character's identity and fate.

Exploring his own identity as a Mississippian, Faulkner "created a cosmos of [his] own" (LG 255) with the people who endure their situation and cope with the



world they live in. The examination of Quentin's sense of place especially explains that his identity is deeply rooted in and intertwined with the problems based on his attachment to a certain place. This would be the primary reason why Faulkner made a bold decision to re-use the dead Quentin in subsequent works. At the same time, Quentin is not the only person who struggles with the identity issues; other characters also face their identity crisis and try to overcome such difficulties. The brief summaries of each chapter reveal that the search for identity does not always result in a happy ending, which is best represented in Quentin's suicide. Yet, it is Faulkner's often-severe treatment of the characters that ultimately makes his works "real," even though they are set in fictional, mythical Yoknapatawpha.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> This dissertation does not include "Lion" because the narrator was changed when the story was revised. The short story, which first appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1935, was later drastically revised and then incorporated into the short story "The Bear," found in *Go Down, Moses*. On this occasion, the narrator, "I" (presumably Quentin), was changed into the third-person narrator, and Isaac (Ike) McCaslin became the protagonist. According to Edmond L. Volpe and Joseph Blotner, there are a few other short stories of which Quentin was considered to be a narrator up to a certain point (Volpe 192-93; *US* 684-85, 691-92). They are "A Bear Hunt," "Fool about a Horse," and "The Old People." There are two reasons for not including them in this dissertation. First, Quentin does not appear in their final versions of any of these stories. Volpe and John W. Hunt assume that Quentin is the narrator of "A Bear Hunt" (192), but Quentin's name does not appear anywhere in the short story. Second, "Fool about a

Horse” is incorporated into *The Hamlet*, whereas “The Old People” becomes part of *Go Down, Moses*. Like “Lion,” it is difficult to examine these short stories without consulting *The Hamlet* and *Go Down, Moses*. The revisions of the previous four short stories suggest that the necessity and importance of a “non-Quentin” narrator began to increase around the mid-1930s.

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